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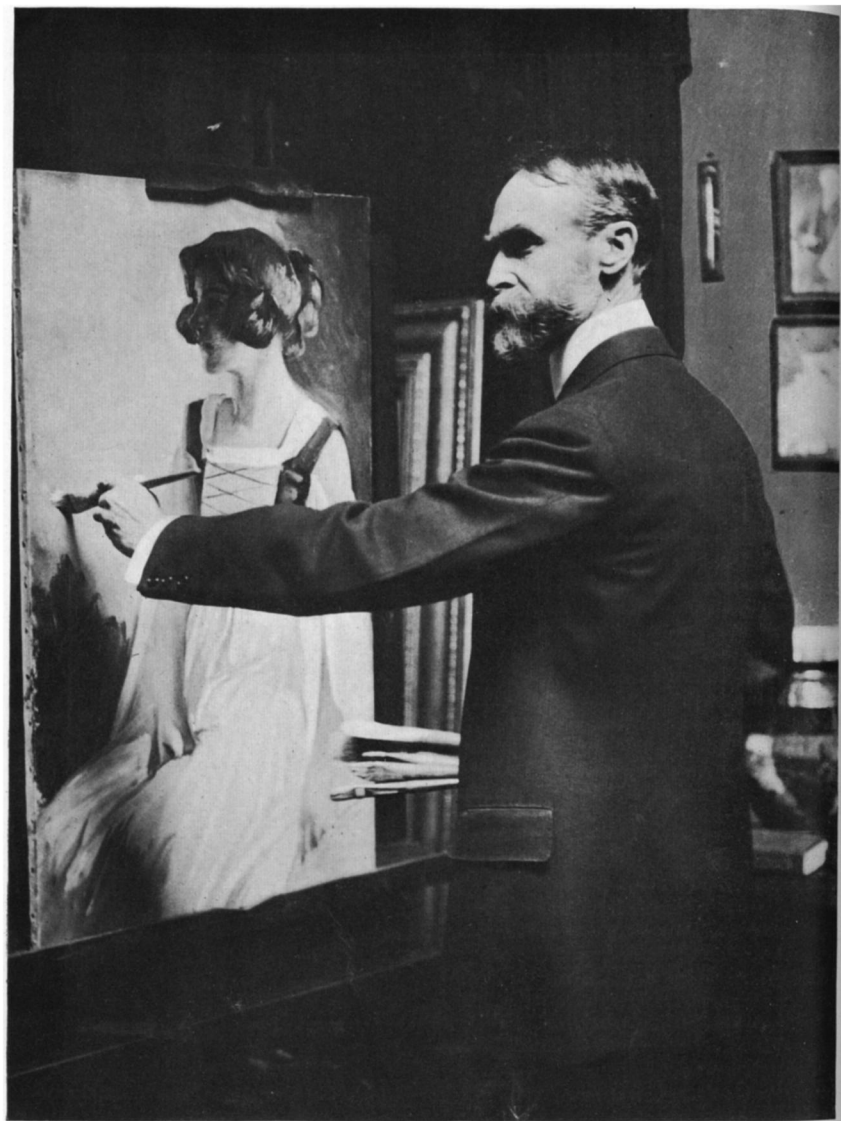
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JOHN W. ALEXANDER

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JOHN W. ALEXANDER*

RECORDER, CREATOR, DREAMER, AND FRIEND

BY EDWIN HOWLAND BLASHFIELD

President of the National Institute of Arts and Letters

IN JOHN ALEXANDER a frail body lodged a tireless eager spirit, tireless and unquenched by illness to the very end, eager, not only in search for beauty, but in service to his fellows. Among artists some are recorders, some arrangers, some are creators and some are dreamers of dreams.

Now and then a man comes who may belong to any one of these groups, but who adds to his artistic capacity and his technical gift a capacity for communication to others and an instinctive desire to stimulate, to push at the wheels wherever he sees that they turn slowly. Such a man soon becomes a leader. Toward leadership John Alexander gravitated instinctively and in it he established himself solidly, using the experience of one official position to affirm that of another, touching the circle of the Arts at many points in its circumference and strengthening himself by each fresh touch. If a man is strong enough physically to withstand the demands of such arduous effort, he gains enormously in the power to synthesize that effort and to build up from one department to another.

Alexander was not strong enough and he paid the physical penalty, but while his life lasted he never relaxed that effort, and he made it fruitful, feeding it always with persistent enthusiasm.

For instance; in this synthesizing of effort, he worked first as a member of the Metropolitan Museum's Board at increasing

and safeguarding that Museum's treasures, next as a member of the School Art League, he worked at the provision of intelligent appreciation of those treasures, appreciation planted in the minds of the children of the city to grow till it should reward the Museum's effort with understanding adult and trained. He talked to the children who flocked to see the painting and sculpture and the art objects of all kinds.

And when the children went away he followed them to their east side clubs and schools, and talked to them again encouraging them to try experiments of their own in painting and modelling, and he stimulated them with prizes which he adjudged and sometimes instituted. He loved this work among the children and he told me with a twinkle, and more than once, of how these very young people managed to fortify the doubtful experiment of a journey into art by the undoubted pleasure of at least beginning that journey on roller-skates. "Dozens of them," said he, "skate to their lecture." If he was busy with the children's welfare, the interests of his comrades of all ages busied him still more. He was a painter through and through; nevertheless, the sister arts of music and the drama claimed and obtained his time in one of his favorite fields of effort, the MacDowell Club.

To the plastic presentation of the drama, its costuming, lighting and colors, he gave enthusiastic attention, aided, almost al-

*An address delivered at a meeting held by the American Federation of Arts in commemoration of the life and services of the late John W. Alexander in the Corcoran Gallery of Art on the evening of May 18, 1916.

ways, by Mrs. Alexander. It was an easy progression for him from his canvases to the moving pictures of a pageant or a play and his swift inventiveness enabled him to get through a prodigious amount of work in a short time, in such productions for instance as Miss Maude Adams's Jeanne d'Arc at the Harvard Stadium, or in the many series of tableaux which he arranged for charity. "If you have a frame and some gauze," said he to me, "you have no idea how much you can do in a moment with a few colored rags." I had an idea for I had seen him juggle with them and had admired the effects which he produced so easily, for he seemed to take pains easily and with a geniality which relieved his beneficiary from a sense of too great obligation. This graceful suavity was a potent factor in his helpfulness, but he was so smiling and kindly that I fear one did not always realize how much his ready service sometimes tired him.

During the last year of his life I saw him many times a week and we often came home together from the Academy council or from other committee meetings.

Although as I have said his spirit was not tired, his body was. Again and again he rose from a sick bed to preside upon some platform. His delicate features which recalled some cavalier's portrait by Vandyck, were at times during his last year almost transparent looking. And yet he was so resilient, he so responded to the stimulus of work to do, he had recovered so many times from severe attacks, that his death when it came was not only a great shock but was a surprise. Critics, writers of books, will talk to us at length of his art, there is time tonight for only the briefest impression of it. One would say that a refinement, rising to distinction was its most obvious quality. Pattern and lighting were what seemed to interest him most of all. Long, sweeping, curving lines he sought for or rather seemed to find without searching and they gave a decorative character to all his portraits.

In his color, restraint was a notable quality, a notable preservative, a notable insurance against either crudity or lushness, against vulgarity of any kind. Now and again he composed large and elaborated groups as in his panels for the Carnegie

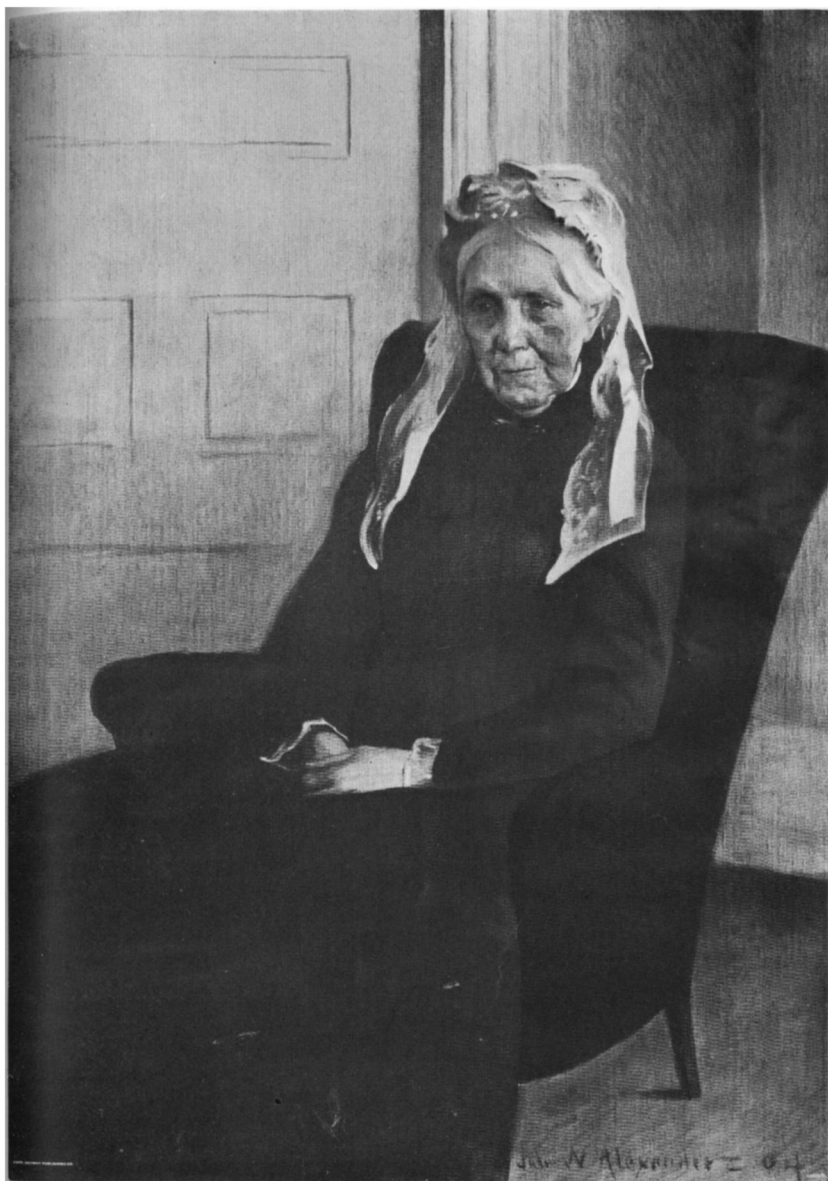
Institute of Pittsburgh, which make up one of the most extensive series of decorations ever painted. But he loved simplicity and thought simply in his painting and he seemed to like best and be happiest in his treatment of single figures. It was peculiarly in these that his sense of pattern and of line, of long sweeping curves, never failed him.

He was very personal in his lighting which was simple and large, yet at the same time was often extremely picturesque in its arrangement. Its effect was not a little enhanced by his predisposition toward masses of reflected light which he used with great skill.

Restraint reaching to sobriety marked most of his color. He liked to use a warm gray in wide planes and then to strike into it one or two dominant spots of rich or brilliant colors. A few years ago he built a very large studio in the Catskills, and I believe that the trees and hills of his beloved Onteora got into the color of his pictures and helped towards that predilection for a whole gamut of greens which you may easily note as you look about the walls of his exhibition—gray greens, blue greens, olive greens, yellow greens, greens of the color of thick glass. His pigment was brushed easily and flowingly. Sometimes he painted a whole portrait with what artists would call a "fat brush," but usually the color was thin with occasional loaded passages, the canvas being sometimes hardly more than stained.

The sureness of his recording was remarkable and its swiftness was phenomenal. This, of course, was an extraordinary insurance against any kind of heaviness in his color since overpainting is one of the worst enemies to freshness of surface. His swiftness of recording must be emphasized again. I should hardly dare to say in how short a time he executed one or two portraits which hung upon the walls of his drawing-room and which he called unfinished, though they were very satisfying, certainly, to me.

Much as I should like to linger over his painting I cannot keep away from the subject of his eagerness to help other artists to find a gallery adequate to the housing of their painting. The search for a home for the National Academy of Design, was



PORTRAIT OF MRS. WHEATON

JOHN W. ALEXANDER

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WHEATON COLLEGE

the central preoccupation of the last years of his life. It was interesting indeed, when he spoke upon any platform and any subject, to see how many angles of approach he could find to that *one* subject which was nearest his heart, the new gallery, which should some day house a dozen different societies of artists.

I have said that some artists are recorders, some inventors, some creators and some are dreamers of dreams. Recorder and creator he certainly was. While he was still a

child, he was for a while a little messenger boy, and he never ceased to be a messenger, bringing stimulus of words and example, writing his name with Abou ben Adhem's as a lover of his fellows. And a dreamer he was of dreams; of a dream we fully believe shall come true, when New York shall have a great gallery all its own and which we may link in our thought with the memory of the devoted President of the Academy, John Alexander.

E. H. B.

JOHN W. ALEXANDER: ORGANIZER AND LEADER*

BY HOWARD RUSSELL BUTLER

Vice-president of the National Academy of Design

WE ARE met tonight to do honor to the memory of one who truly loved the beautiful—who not only left with us important and inspiring creations of his own genius, but who labored incessantly and with a zeal which far outran his physical strength, to encourage others in their efforts to reach the goal attained by him through bitter struggle.

I will not in the few minutes allotted to me attempt any discussion of the merits of his art. His works speak to us directly and more eloquently than could any words of mine.

It is on the subject of his untiring efforts to awaken and cultivate an interest in true art in this country that I have been requested to say a few words, and particularly I am asked to touch on the valuable services rendered by him in organizing and conducting the work of the societies devoted to art in the City of New York. It was through these that he was incessantly using his influence for the advancement of the great cause to which he dedicated his life.

When Alexander finally settled in New York his reputation had been well established in France. He was warmly received into all the prominent bodies of artists here and it was not long before his ability and willingness to work made him a leader in most of them.

To understand the part taken by Alexander one must realize the many obstacles which have stood in the pathway of native art in this country and especially in the City of New York. There was a great lack of interest on the part of the public and much apathy and indifference on the part of dealers and patrons, who held that no good art could come out of American studios. Then there was a great schism in the ranks of the profession itself. The now historic struggle, which began about the time of the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 and which lasted until 1906, between the older and the younger schools was at its height when he began his work here. It was the old academy on Twenty-third street against the Society of American Artists on Fifty-seventh street. Whatever the merits of each side, and there is little use of discussing them now, the problem before Alexander was largely one of reconciliation. Nothing reconciles like the discovery that both sides are working for the same great aim, in this case the advancement of true art, and Alexander was always quick to discover sincerity of purpose. His sympathy was with those who were really striving. He was very soon "persona grata" in both camps.

The sale of the Twenty-third street building had left the Academy of Design

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